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ABSTRACT

Practical suggestions for the use of volunteers in the English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) classroom, and strategies for planning the volunteer role, are offered. Nine potential roles for the volunteer are outlined, with specific recommendations for activities and topic areas that the volunteer can undertake. These include: classroom monitor, circulating through the classroom and providing additional conversational opportunities; co-presenter, assisting in presentation of new activities or a partner in dialogue; nurturer (encouraging less confident or less experienced students); small group teacher; pull-out group leader; tutor (to assist individual students with special needs); classroom teacher during teacher conferencing; special project assistant; and contributor of special talents. Teachers are also encouraged to maintain clear communication with volunteers, provide feedback, and address possible mismatches immediately. (MSE)

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Using Volunteers in your ESL Classroom

Suggestions for Newer Teachers

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by Kate Singleton

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Picture this: You've just received word from your volunteer coordinator that a brand new, eager volunteer will be starting with your class next Monday. What are you going to do?

Volunteers can be a tremendous asset in the ESL classroom. They can help you give extra attention to all of the students while the class is engaged in practice activities, or they can give extra help to small groups or individuals in the class.

However, as you begin to use volunteers in your classroom, you will need to put a little extra time into planning how you'd like to put them to use, and you will need to designate time either before or during class (sometimes volunteers have to arrive late because of their work schedules) for clarifying your plans with the volunteer. The time it takes to do the extra planning is well worth it, though; it also decreases as you get used to it and build up your supply of strategies for using volunteers. And as your volunteer becomes more acquainted with your students' needs and your teaching style, he or she usually requires less explanation of activities. In general, the gains to your students and yourself far outweigh the bit of extra effort initially needed in using volunteers.

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Here are some tried and true ideas for using volunteers in your class. They have been collected from teachers who have used volunteers successfully for many years. They are listed in order from basic to more elaborate.

- **classroom monitor** - As you circulate through your class to monitor student progress during activities, the volunteer does the same. S/he can be checking for:

- accurate pronunciation
- reading comprehension
- accurate grammar
- general comprehension of the activity
- or whatever else you choose to focus the activity on.

S/he can also provide extra conversation for shyer or quieter students, and opportunities to interact with another native speaker (if the volunteer is in fact a native speaker). As you present new activities, the volunteer can sit with students who are a little lower than the others and help them understand your instructions.

- **co-presenter** - The volunteer can assist you in the presentation of new activities. For example, a volunteer can:

- take a role in a dialogue with you. If you are presenting a conversation to your class, the volunteer can take the other part so that it will sound and appear more authentic for the students.

- model the activity with you. If you want the students to do pair work, you and the volunteer can demonstrate how it should be done. For instance, you ask a question, and the volunteer answers with an appropriate response. It's best if you let the volunteer know exactly what you are looking for in advance.
- read half of a dictation. After you have set the pace of the dictation, the volunteer can read part of it, to challenge the students with a different speaker.

- **nurturer** - Especially in lower level classes, often the big thing holding many students back is low self-confidence. Volunteers can play a very important role simply by sitting among them and encouraging the under-confident and inexperienced students. The importance of this role cannot be overstated.

- **group teacher** - For part of a class session, you can divide the class in two and have the volunteer teach one group while you teach the other. Both groups can cover the same material. This set-up gives the advantage of smaller groups and therefore more attention and opportunities for participation for the students. It is best to have had your volunteer do a lot of monitoring prior to teaching a group. The volunteer needs to know what you expect to accomplish in the group. Monitoring experience will expose the volunteer to your teaching style and goals for the class, and s/he will have become familiar with individual students.

- **pull-out group leader** - A pull-out group is a group of like-ability students who work separately from the whole class for part of the class session. The groups can:

- address special needs that the students have in common, like reading, writing or pronunciation problems
- provide more challenging work for higher students
- give students an opportunity to focus on skills like conversation with a lot of feedback that you can=t always provide in a large group

You provide your volunteer with materials and detailed instructions for working with the group, and a place to work (e.g. an empty classroom or office that is available to you, desks in the hallway, or the other half of your classroom). Leveled materials, such as the Personal Stories (Palatine, IL: Linmore Publishing, 1985) or True Stories (White Plains, NY: Addison Wesley Longman Publishing, 1996) series are helpful to use for reading pull-out groups, because while you work with one level of the text, the volunteer can work with another. Less planning is required, and students feel like they are all doing the same thing, not missing out on something another group is doing.

- **one-on-one tutor** - You can provide your volunteer with materials, instructions and a place to help one student with special needs at their own pace for part of the class. This can be helpful for a student with literacy problems that are more extreme than the others in the class. It can also be helpful if a student tells you that there is a certain challenging situation coming up in their life that they need to prepare for,

like a test for a driving permit or citizenship, or a job interview, and it is not appropriate for the whole group to work on the topic at that time.

- **teacher conferencing** - Many teachers like to conference with students individually about their progress and/or study needs. Your volunteer, given detailed instructions and materials, can serve as teacher to the class while you take students out one at a time.

- **special project assistant** - When you want to conduct special projects with the class, volunteers can be extremely helpful. Here are some examples that teachers have used in the past:

- **job interviews** - After you have practiced interviews in class for a while, a volunteer can role play a potential employer and conduct final interviews with students. In a location separate from the classroom, your volunteer can make the situation as real-life as possible, greeting the student formally and asking a variety of questions specific to the job the student is interested in. If you have access to video equipment, the volunteer can operate the camera by remote to record the interviews and play them back for the class later.

- **class newspapers or news shows** - You and your volunteer can divide up the parts of the paper or show that students choose to work on, and you can each guide the students' work on your respective parts.

- **giving instructions/describing an interest** - One teacher wanted her high beginners to make a presentation for the class describing how to do an activity of their choosing. To introduce the project, the class's volunteer, a cycling enthusiast, demonstrated how to pump up a bike tire. Students had to answer questions about the steps and repeat back the instructions.

- **special talents** - It is good to keep sight of the fact that every volunteer brings special talents and interests to your class, not to mention a different outlook on American life to share with your students. As you learn more about your volunteers, you may discover that some of their particular talents can contribute something extra to your students. Recently one volunteer who is a professional cameraman brought in video equipment and gave beginning level students instructions as if they were on a tv set while they recorded dialogues they had been practicing. The students enjoyed the tv production atmosphere and got a real kick out of seeing themselves on video speaking English. Another volunteer specializes in theatrical vocal training, which keeps her weekly phonics/beginning literacy pull-out groups very lively and creative for students. One volunteer who worked for America OnLine was particularly helpful at locating internet sites that would be useful and interesting for a pre-academic class.

Hopefully these suggestions will help you feel more comfortable about using volunteers. In closing, here are a some important considerations for using volunteers.

Golden Rules of Using Volunteers

1. **Clear communication is key!** - Give clear instructions and adequate materials to your volunteer. From the onset, ask your volunteer what they want to get out of volunteering with your class, and explain what you and your students need from a volunteer.

2. **Feedback, feedback, feedback!** - Your volunteer needs feedback on how s/he is doing. Many feel just as nervous about teaching as your students do about studying. Also, you need feedback on how volunteer-led activities go, to find out about student progress and to make sure the volunteer feels comfortable doing what you've asked.

3. **If it's just not a good match...** - If you find yourself having difficulty working with a particular volunteer, try to clear things up as soon as possible. It may be that you and the volunteer just have different expectations of the volunteer's role. If you continue to have difficulties after you discuss the situation with the volunteer yourself, contact the volunteer coordinator for your program. The volunteer coordinator can speak with the volunteer and find the best solution. That might mean clarifying the class's and teacher's needs to the volunteer and the volunteer's concerns to the teacher, or it could mean reassigning the volunteer to another part of the program where they will be more comfortable.